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What can cities do to prevent serious youth violence?

Anthony A Braga and Christopher Winship consider Boston's Operation Ceasefire and the ways in which the model might be implemented in other communities affected by youth violence.

Over the course of the 1990s, Boston received national attention for Operation Ceasefire and other innovative efforts to prevent serious youth violence. In the four years after Operation Ceasefire was launched in 1996, youth homicides in the city dropped by almost two-thirds (Braga et al., 2001; Kennedy et al., 1996). As a result, the US Department of Justice embraced Operation Ceasefire's 'pulling levers' strategy as an effective approach to violence prevention and, with funding from federally sponsored violence prevention programmes, many American cities developed similar programmes. The general approach was attractive to other jurisdictions suffering from serious youth violence problems as it blended strategic enforcement, community mobilisation and social service and opportunity provision.

After several years of very low numbers of youth homicides in Boston, Operation Ceasefire was discontinued in 2000. Unfortunately, youth homicide in Boston soon

increased and, initially, the city was not very well positioned to deal with its new cycle of serious youth violence (Braga and Winship, 2006). Beginning in 2006, the City of Boston revived the Ceasefire approach and, once again, serious youth violence has declined (Braga et al., 2008).

The basic framework used in 'pulling levers' strategies such as Boston's Operation Ceasefire represents a robust approach to preventing serious youth violence that can be adapted in many cities.

However, certain key elements must be in place to transfer the approach successfully to other cities. First, cities must conduct problem analysis research to identify the nature of youth violence in a particular city so the approach can be

appropriately tailored. It is important that cities follow the action research model and problem-solving process rather than simply importing tactics from Boston that may or may not fit their local youth violence problem.

Second, it is essential to establish a 'network of capacity' consisting of dense and productive relationships

among criminal justice, social service, and community-based agencies that must work together to address the problem of violent youth crime.

Third, and equally important, in order for the overall violence prevention strategy to be viewed as legitimate, criminal justice agencies need to develop a relationship with the community that is cemented in trust and accountability. Below we briefly describe Boston's experience with pulling levers and highlight the importance of the latter two key elements.

The Boston Gun Project and Operation Ceasefire

Like many American cities during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boston suffered an epidemic of youth violence that had its roots in the rapid spread of street-level crack-cocaine markets. In 1995, as part of its ongoing efforts to address the problem, the Police Department launched the Boston Gun Project, a collaborative effort, which aimed to analyse the underlying causes of the problem and then to use that analysis to identify the most promising strategies for preventing and controlling serious youth violence. The analysis and planning phase began in early 1995 and the strategy, named Operation Ceasefire, was implemented in mid 1996.

At the beginning of this effort, the Boston Gun Project working group, which consisted of law enforcement personnel, youth workers and Harvard researchers, analysed the nature of Boston's youth violence. They concluded it was largely the result of patterned, generally vendetta-like hostility among a small population of highly active criminal offenders – particularly those involved in about 60 loose, informal, mostly neighbourhood-based gangs.

Based on the findings, the working group crafted Operation Ceasefire, which tightly focused on disrupting ongoing conflicts among youth gangs. On a biweekly basis, the Boston Police Department's Youth Violence Strike Force (YVSF), an elite unit of about 40 officers and detectives, convened an interagency working group, comprised of law

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enforcement personnel, youth workers, and members of Boston's Ten Point Coalition of activist black clergy. The group developed a 'pulling levers' strategy (Kennedy, 1997), which aimed to deter gang violence by reaching out directly to gangs, explicitly saying that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing up that message by 'pulling every lever' legally available when violence occurred. These 'levers' included disrupting street-level drug markets, serving warrants, mounting federal prosecutions and changing the conditions of community supervision for targeted probationers and parolees. Simultaneously, youth workers, probation and parole officers and clergy offered gang members services and other kinds of help. If gang members wanted to step away from a violent lifestyle, the Operation Ceasefire working group focused on providing them with the services and opportunities necessary to make the transition.

The working group delivered their anti-violence message in formal meetings with gang members; through individual police and probation contacts with gang members; through meetings with inmates of secure juvenile facilities in the city; and through gang outreach workers. The deterrence message was not a deal with gang members to stop violence. Rather, it was a promise to gang members that violent behaviour would evoke an immediate and substantial response.

The need for a network of capacity

Before the Boston Gun Project began work on what ultimately became Operation Ceasefire, it had already created what Moore (2002) has called the 'network of capacity' necessary to legitimise, fund, equip and carry out complex strategies for controlling and preventing youth violence. In the early 1990s, the youth violence crisis forced Boston criminal justice agencies to work together and develop new approaches to deal with the violence problem. YVSF officers and detectives and line-level workers from other criminal justice agencies collaborated on a variety

of innovative programmes such as a police-probation partnership to ensure at-risk youth were abiding by the conditions of their release into the community and partnerships with federal law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend illegal gun traffickers who were arming the violent gangs.

The YVSF also formed working relationships with social service and opportunity provision agencies. For instance, the police supported the activities of youth social service providers from community-based organisations by encouraging at-risk youth to take advantage of these resources. The police also considered the input of youth workers in determining whether certain gang-involved youth would be better served by prevention and intervention actions rather than law enforcement actions.

As a result, when the Police Department launched Operation Ceasefire it was able to capitalise on these existing relationships by focusing the network on the problem of youth violence and giving the group a wide range of 'levers' that it could 'pull' in its efforts address that problem. Partnerships with other criminal justice agencies, for example, offered a varied menu of enforcement options that could be tailored to particular gangs. By including social service agencies and other community groups, Operation Ceasefire also provided much-needed 'carrots' to balance the law enforcement 'sticks'.

Accountability and police-community relations

Operation Ceasefire also was profoundly influenced by an ongoing and significant change in the relationship between the Boston Police and Boston's minority communities. When the violence

epidemic started in the late 1980s, the Boston Police Department relied upon highly aggressive and reportedly indiscriminate policing tactics to deal with street gang violence, such as stopping and frisking all black males in high crime areas (Winship and Berrien, 1999). This approach produced a series of well-publicised scandals that eventually led to extensive changes in the leadership and crime prevention strategies of the Boston

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Police Department. The Department invested in technology to better understand crime problems, implemented a neighbourhood policing plan, and trained beat-level officers in the methods of community and problem-oriented policing.

While such changes helped create an environment where the police could collaborate with the community, residents of Boston's poor minority neighbourhoods remained wary of, and dissatisfied with, a police department that had a long history of abusive and unfair treatment. The Ten Point Coalition, a group of activist black ministers who came together in 1992 to address the problem of gang violence in their communities, played a major role in changing this perception.

The ministers in the coalition

tried to prevent youths in their community from joining gangs, to convince gang members to cease violent activities and to convey an anti-violence message to all youths in their communities. Initially, the ministers were highly and publicly critical of police efforts to prevent youth violence. As the ministers began to work the streets, however, they started to form effective relationships with particular police officers, who were starting to carry out the department's emerging efforts to prevent violent youth crime. As a result, the ministers and the police officers began to develop a shared understanding that only a small number of youths in the neighbourhoods were involved in violence; many of these gang-involved youths were better served by intervention and prevention strategies; and only a small number of these gang-involved youths needed to be removed from the streets through arrest and prosecution.

When the working group was ready to implement Operation Ceasefire, the YVSF asked key black ministers to support and assist the initiative. The ministers recognised that Ceasefire was carefully focused only on violent gang-involved youth and offered gang members who wanted to change access to social services. By including the ministers in the Ceasefire working group, the Boston Police developed a mechanism for transparency and accountability, which was very important to leaders of Boston's minority community. This, in turn,

built trust and further solidified a functional working relationship between the community and the police department. By engaging in a process in which they were meaningfully and appropriately accountable to the community, the Police Department generated the political support, or 'umbrella of legitimacy', that it needed to pursue more focused and perhaps more aggressive intervention than would otherwise have been possible (Winship and Berrien, 1999).

Conclusion

The 'pulling levers' strategy is a promising approach to preventing serious urban youth violence. Cities should develop a version of the approach that fits the nature of their youth violence problem and operational capacities of their criminal justice, social service and community-based agencies. A functional network of capacity needs to be in place to provide a wide range of incentives and disincentives to prevent violent behaviour by city youths. Criminal justice agencies involved in 'pulling levers' strategies must engage the community and create a sense of joint ownership of the youth violence problem. Such partnerships can create the political support necessary for both innovation and more focused and aggressive intervention. ■

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